

## **Edda P.-S.**

**"We all had to leave. There were no factories, nothing."**



**Edda P.-S., f., born in Poschiavo (Puschlav), in Graubunden, Switzerland in 1928, in Chur 1951-1955, Zurich from 1955**

*Where did you grow up?*

I was born in Chur in 1928. I grew up in Poschiavo, where I also went to primary and secondary school. When I was seven my brother was born: in 1938, my sister, in 1942 another brother.

My mother's family came from the Veltlin. Being Protestants, during the counterreformation they fled to Poschiavo. My mother's parents emigrated to Spain; all the children were born there. They came back to Switzerland around 1907. My grandfather ran the "Chalet della Stazione" restaurant in Poschiavo. He died young, and my grandmother remarried.

My father was a farmer and teacher, and I was one of his pupils, but I didn't like it. He was very strict with me, stricter than with the others.

*What did you do in your spare time?*

We had to do our homework first. When it wasn't written neatly, my father would tear it up and I had to start again instead of playing outside. But we had it good as kids. We could play out in the streets, sometimes we'd play hide and seek until eight in the evening.

*What was put on the table at that time?*

There wasn't meat very often during the war. Everything was rationed, but we had our own eggs and milk and cheese. Once a year, they'd slaughter a pig. I always used to have a face full of spots after that, because of all the meat and the sausages. Once they hung a load of

sausages in an adjoining room and went to eat. When they came back down, all the sausages were gone – stolen.

*Did you have to lend a hand with the farmwork?*

Yes. We were woken at six. We had to turn the hay and in the afternoon rake it into little piles. I didn't enjoy it. Farmwork was a nightmare for me.

*What did you want to become at that time?*

When I was twelve I said to my father: "When I'm grown up, I want to be a waitress". He said, "that's out of the question". Everyone studied. My sister is a kindergarten teacher, and my brother passed his school leaving certificate. My father said: "You have to learn something respectable".

When I was 16 I went to Balgach in the Rheintal to learn German. I had to work like an idiot there. For 40 francs a month I had to do all the household chores and wash and iron and burn coke for heat – that was during the war. My father didn't believe it. Later an uncle, he was a post inspector, came by from St Gallen. I told him how I was living. Then he wrote home, saying they should come and take me back straight away. Then I could go home. I didn't want anything to do with the school. Nonetheless I went to a housekeeping course at the women's school for half a year. Afterwards my mother said: "You could do a plain needlework course at the women's school". That would've been another half a year gone. I said: "If I have to do a plain needlework course, I'll jump in the river".

After that my father sent me to the French-speaking part of Switzerland to learn French. Through a pastor he found a post with a 97-year-old lady. I had to read to her and do a bit of cooking. I got to know Swiss-Germans in the French courses. They organised a Swiss-German festival with folk music, but I wasn't allowed to get away. I waited until the lady was asleep, then I sneaked out with my shoes in my hand. I came back the next morning at about five o'clock, carrying my shoes again. At eight she woke me and said: "Come on, my dear, we're going to church" – "No, I've got a headache". I did that two or three times, until she caught me. She wrote to my father that she couldn't be held responsible for me, and I had to go home.

A friend of mine called me and said that she was working in a wonderful tea-room in Thun, and that I should go there. My father said no, but I protested until I was allowed to. So I was in service in Thun. It was fine, we had lots of soldiers. Actually I wanted to be serving food, I was 18 years old. The Grand Hotel Alpina in Gstaad put an advert in the paper looking for a waitress. They put me to work in the bar. Famous people, such as King Farouk, were among

the guests. I spent the season there, it was great. That's how I started in service. After that I went to Zurich and never left. My parents weren't happy at all, but I enjoyed this work.

In the meantime I went back home every couple of months, because I was homesick. In 1952, when I was 22 years old, I had my first daughter. I met my husband later.

*Didn't you later regret not having stayed in Puschlav?*

What would I have done in Puschlav? We all had to leave. There were no factories, nothing.

*What did your parents pass on to you? What was important to them?*

What was important in this life was to be honest. My father was cashier at the dairy and kept all the money in his desk. He said: "If anybody ever dares to take anything from here, then..." The example our parents gave us was the standard we took for life.

*How often did you go to church?*

Every Sunday. My father was an organist. He gave school for Protestants and for Catholics. We had nothing to do with the Catholics. The Protestants were in the minority at the time. They weren't liked. They would've liked it if they had all gone away.

*Do you still have contact with people from the village?*

Yes, with my best friend from that time. We saw each other at the class reunion. We still write to each other. And another one that I still have contact with lives in Regensdorf.

*Can you remember your first impressions of Zurich?*

Nothing but disappointments. There were crooked people, and I couldn't see at that time how people could be like that, that such evil people existed. I was really naïve. For instance, I had a room with a Mrs N. on Asylstrasse. I had to go through the living room to get to my room. I came home, opened the door, went to the toilet and, when I came back to my room, the key wasn't there any more. The landlady went right over the top and threatened to call the police. I was crying. A woman came out and said: "Pack your bags and come to my place". She lived on Breitensteinstrasse. I could stay with her for a couple of days and it turned out that she was a whore. I didn't know what that was. At that time I still had dreams of a white wedding and children – and then you see such a thing, which you've never seen or heard of before. I also remember how at sixteen I got my first French kiss and thought: "What a pig!" If I see him today, I stay out of his way. That's the impression it made on me. I didn't know what it was. One time when I was fifteen, someone said to me: "Do you know where children come from? The man has to buy a white liquid in the chemist's and put it into the woman. Then there's a baby." It's sad, to know so little at such an age.

Once – it was at Christmas – I called home from Zurich and cried. I said: “Father, please come and get me. I can’t stand this any more.” He came and got me, and I stayed at home for half a year.

*Were there also good sides to the city of Zurich?*

Yes, I enjoyed being here in Zurich. I always had to work. We didn’t get much free time, just one free day and no holidays. I had a room at an old woman’s place. Today everybody has a flat. I also had friends here. We used to go to the cinema or dancing sometimes.

*How did you get your first job in Zurich?*

The first job was at the Neuhaus tea-room at Stauffacher. I had applied at a job agency that was called the Vera office. They wrote out a couple of addresses for me. The boss always said to me: “You’re so different from all the others. You don’t swear, you’ve got good manners. You don’t fit in here.” After that I had a couple of jobs. In the end I went to the Autopark in Schwamendingen. I stayed there serving for ten years and trusted the boss a bit. After ten years my brother came. He said: “You’re good at your job. You should set up on your own.” He offered me help, so I looked for a restaurant and found the Letzi. That went brilliantly.

It could get pretty hectic in the Letzi sometimes. A lot of youths would sit at the round table sometimes. I had a jukebox with the records they liked. Sometimes it was just a bit loud. The older ones in their turn didn’t like that and would curse because of the music. I had to decide for the youngsters. But there were also bad times. All sorts used to come into that restaurant. One wanted to throw his helmet at my head one time. We threw him out. Then he threatened to wreck the whole place. It was bad when they were drunk.

The Letzi was a decent local restaurant. It was much better during the first years. It was always the same, it was like a family. But later, when the drugs came in . . . When I went for a lie-down in the afternoons, they’d be smoking behind the building. I didn’t know what drugs were then. Someone came out of the toilet one time and I thought: that smells so strange. Then someone said to me: “Don’t you know what’s going on? That’s hashish.” Then I went down and said: “Do that again and . . .” It was bad with the drugs.

*Did people from Puschlav also come?*

Yes. I had the Progrigioni Italiano once. 55 people. I made Pizzocheri and mixed salad. I also made Pizzocheri for the Puschlav. At Christmas they had their party – only Puschlav people. I only opened for them. We had a Christmas tree and all the children from Puschlav that live here came. In autumn we had *Castagnata*. They roasted chestnuts in the garden. Once a week they came to play cards. It was a great time.

*Did you always have contact with Puschlav people in Zurich?*

Not much. There's an association. When I took over the restaurant, they always came. When I quit they came and sang for me. Lovely, the *coro Alpestre*. There are also Puschlav people who live here. I was always happy when I saw Puschlav people.

*How did you manage as a mother with four children?*

The eldest daughter grew up with the grandparents. The other three were mostly with my mother-in-law. It was difficult, with the money too. I was serving, mostly in the evenings. If I had early shift, I'd go home to the children. When I had time off, I'd take them. I always hoped: "Maybe soon you won't have to go to work." But that didn't happen. Four cars. Hardly had one been paid for than another would be parked in front of the house. I had to pay. My husband didn't like working. His mother supported him. Somebody had to earn money. But it wasn't good for the children. They reproached me later that they had had to grow up with their grandmother. These days they understand, but it wasn't good for a long time.

My ex was a drinker. He died when he was 59. After that I had Eddi, who I got to know at the Autopark. He was a cook. But he was twenty years younger than me. His downfall came when I took over the restaurant – with drink this time, too. He died when he was 39; his liver packed up. Whenever I'd say to him that he should stop drinking, he'd say: "I'll live to a hundred. It doesn't do me any harm." I've always met men that drink. I'm happy now with Armand. I don't want it any other way.

That was my life, straight up and down. The mother-in-law was really bad.

*Have you stayed in contact with Poschiavo over the years?*

When I was married, I always went home for the holidays, always to my parents' holiday house. The kids loved it up there. And it did us good. My father paid for everything. My ex wasn't able to pay for our holidays either.

*Did your father always give you support?*

Yes, a bit. I didn't want to be dependent on my parents. I worked. But I always had to pay. The men fleeced me, both of them. I'd be a rich woman today if I still had all that. But it's past.

Instead I have four decent children. That's worth a lot too. I have a good relationship with my son, and with the daughters. One of them is just a bit distant. The eldest never has time. But she always calls, and she drops in if she's ever in Zurich for a couple of hours.

*What was learning German like for you?*

In this women's school we had cookery lessons. The teacher would tell us how we had to do it. If I asked: "What does that mean?" I got detention as fast as lightning. I spoke High German then. But I learned fast. Three of us had a room together. The other girls came from Prättigau and Oberhalbstein. They spoke a strong dialect. I picked it up quickly and never lost it.

*How was your contact with Swiss Germans?*

My first contact with Swiss-Germans took place in French-speaking Switzerland. There were Swiss-Germans in the school where we had French lessons. I noticed that the Swiss-French didn't care so much for the Swiss-Germans. Someone said to me: "If you want to learn French, don't hang around with those Swiss-Germans. You don't have to speak German all the time, otherwise you'll never learn." So I began to speak a bit of French. I had a friend and she could only speak French. In a year I could speak and write perfect French.

*How did people react in Zurich when they found out that someone came from Puschlav?*

Some asked: "Puschlav? Is that in Italy?" or: "Are you a bit behind the times at home?" That was how it sounded sometimes, and that's how it still sounds today. Even today, lots of people don't know where it is.

*Who do you feel you are today?*

I really like Zurich. I've been here nearly fifty years. I feel myself to be a Zurichener, but Poschiavo is still my home. I have both.

*More and more people come to Switzerland from other countries. How do you see life together in the future?*

I wish that there weren't so many foreigners. It's quite bad at the moment. The criminality and all. We didn't use to have that in Zurich, at least not so much.

*What does it need to work?*

Tolerance is part of it. And adaptability. One must always remember that these are also people as we are. I'm always civil to everyone; to black people too, if I'm abroad.

Nigg, Heinz (Hrsg.) (1999) Da und fort. Leben in zwei Welten. Interviews, Berichte und Dokumente zur Immigration und Binnenwanderung in der Schweiz. Zürich: Limmat Verlag

*Did you have foreign staff in your restaurant?*

I had a Portuguese woman for three years, a fine girl. I let them stay at my place because they couldn't find a flat. He helped me sometimes in the cellar. They were really good people. I had a Yugoslav too. I was happy with him too.

Nigg, Heinz (1999) Here and away. Living in two worlds. Zurich: www.migrant.ch  
Translation: Simon Milligan



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